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The Bulgarian Connection Still Holds

By Gordon Crovitz

The trial of seven Bulgarians and Turks accused of helping Mehmet Ali Agca try to kill the pope is in its final phase, with prosecutor Antonio Marini this week summing up his evidence of a conspiracy. His proof includes Agca's admission that the Bulgarians paid him for the shooting, circumstantial evidence that Bulgarian agents in Rome planned the shooting and corroborating evidence by members of the Turkish-Bulgarian smuggling mafia.

Mr. Marini emphasizes that proof of the plot comes "independently of Agca's statements." Italian courts do give weight to kinds of evidence American courts do not, which is one reason they have successfully prosecuted terrorists. Mr. Marini urged the jury of judges and laymen not to be confused by the "falsehoods, scheming and conniving" that marked the seven-month trial. Agca, he said, "put himself on the market as a potential assassin of the pope and somebody enlisted him as a courier of death."

The prosecutor offered his own explanation of Agca's confusing antics during the trial. He argued that at the beginning of the trial, Agca claimed to be Christ and predicted the end of the world to give the Bulgarians time to somehow rescue him. Earlier, Agca had confused his testimony following the June 1983 kidnapping of the daughter of a Vatican employee and subsequent ransom notes demanding Agca's release, which convinced him that the Bulgarians were still trying to spring him. Mr. Marini quoted Agca as saying that his accomplices "wanted me to retract my accusations against them, confound the trial, and then I had the task of discrediting the Western press," which had connected the shooting with Bulgaria and the Soviet Union. Now, according to Mr. Marini, Agca says: "I failed, certainly, and I want to abandon this double game."

Proclaims Its Innocence

Mr. Marini will announce later this week whether he believes there is enough evidence to convict the three Bulgarians and four Turks. Under the Italian system he could ask for acquittal or dismissal for lack of evidence, but his aggressive summation suggests he will ask for a full conviction.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Bloc continues to proclaim its innocence. Just after the May 1981 shooting, Soviet publications claimed Agca was an anti-Christian fanatic acting alone. Then they claimed he was a fascist working for the Grey Wolves, a Turkish terrorist organization. Most recently, the communist line has been that the Central Intelligence Agency and the Italian secret service hired Agca to kill Pope John Paul II and then coached him to implicate the Bulgarians. This accusation centers around Francesco Pazienza, a former Italian intelligence agent held in a New York jail pending extradition to Italy on fraud charges.

A Jan. 15 article in the Soviet publication Literaturnaya Gazeta claims, "Before being arrested in the U.S., Francesco Pazienza managed to hide in Paris a file that can shed some light" on the pope plot. The Jan. 29 issue of the same newspaper contains a half-page article based on an interview with Mr. Pazienza by its New York correspondent, Iona Andronov. It begins with a description of the searches required of journalists interviewing federal prisoners in the U.S. As to the attempt on the pope, the article concludes, "About this, Pazienza, as I was convinced, is afraid to talk out loud within the walls of this American dungeon that has unseen ears."

In fact, by now this communist propaganda line is completely unraveled, and offers no credible alternative explanation for the shooting.

As early as 1982, articles in Soviet and Bulgarian periodicals began claiming that Mr. Pazienza had met with Agca in Italy's Ascoli Piceno Prison and arranged that Agca should implicate the Bulgarians. In the aftermath of the kidnapping and ransom notes demanding his freedom, Agca announced in court that Mr. Pazienza had indeed visited him in prison. Like so many other attacks on his own credibility, Agca soon admitted he'd been lying about any meeting with Mr. Pazienza.

Despite this, Christian Roulette, a French lawyer, wrote a book in 1984 charging that Mr. Pazienza coached Agca; Mr. Roulette asked to testify in the Italian trial, but was forced to admit he had no knowledge of the purported secret Pazienza files. Mr. Marini said the Roulette claim was a glaring example of "massive falsification." The only other testimony connecting Mr. Pazienza to Agca comes from Giovanni Pandico, a convicted Mafia chief. According to reports in the Western press, Mr. Pazienza has dropped various hints about wrongdoings by Western intelligence, though he has denied that he was involved in the coaching of Agca.

The Italian judiciary decided to close its investigations into the Soviet Bloc claim that Agca was somehow coached after Judge Ilario Martella took a deposition from Mr. Pazienza in New York last Dec. 13. The transcript of this interview is the principal evidence on Mr. Pazienza before the Rome court.

Mr. Pazienza had requested the interrogation to clear his name, but began by telling Judge Martella, "You ask me the questions because unfortunately I don't know what is true and what has been fabricated—that is, what has in fact come out of the trial hearing . . . and what on the other hand as usual has come out in the press in a, let's say, very confused way."

Mr. Pazienza told Judge Martella that he "never even dreamed of going to the Ascoli Piceno Prison" and that in any case he had left the Italian intelligence agency SISMI before the papal shooting and so would have had no access to the prison. Judge Martella said he accepted that Mr. Pazienza had no contact with Agca, and said the only evidence to the contrary was from Pandico.

'What Is Your Information?'

Then Mr. Pazienza described discussions in 1980 about SISMI setting up its own disinformation network and claimed SISMI had tried to assassinate him and would kill him if he were extradited. He reported on a conversation he'd had with U.S. Customs agents who asked if he knew that Stefano delle Chiaie, an Italian accused of right-wing terrorism, had been in the U.S., accompanied by an unnamed Turk. Judge Martella repeatedly told Mr. Pazienza to confine his testimony to any information that could shed light on the pope plot. Finally, Judge Martella apparently became exasperated with the rambling testimony and there was the following exchange:

Judge Martella: "What I would like to know, since you have raised it, is what is your information regarding the questions pertaining to the attempt on the pope's life? Here, to complete the logic, I asked you, and I repeat the question, to the extent that you have knowledge of it, to clarify further the motives behind this joint action to kill the pope, if perhaps there was a direct interest of delle Chiaie or of the Grey Wolves, or if on the other hand they may have acted as intermediaries, that is, on behalf of someone else. If you have knowledge of this, say so; otherwise, no."

Mr. Pazienza: "Yes, sir. If I answer that I do have knowledge of this, I would be lying, and I don't want to lie."

Judge Martella: "That is, you must not lie . . ."

Mr. Pazienza: "I would have to tell you my speculations, which have absolutely no value."

Judge Martella: "No. Very good."

Nevertheless, the communist propaganda line remains that Mr. Pazienza has information that would clear the Bulgarians. It may be too soon to know exactly what the Rome court will rule, but it is not too soon to ask how the West would respond if the result is a guilty verdict after all. What does the West say to Bulgaria and its Kremlin bosses if their agents are officially implicated in one of the most heinous crimes of the century?

Mr. Crovitz, a Journal editorial writer, wrote extensively about the Agca case in his former post as editorial page editor of The Wall Street Journal/Europe.

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